

The Naked Truth¹ Harikrishan Kaul

Translated and introduced by Ishrat Bashir

A well-known Kashmiri short story writer, Harikrishna Kaul was born in 1934 in Srinagar. He taught Hindi literature from 1961 to 1989 in the various colleges of Kashmir. He started writing in Kashmiri after 1966. Though many of his short stories were published earlier in local journals like *Sheeraza*, he published his landmark collection of short stories *Pata Laaraan Parbath (The Hills Chase Me)* in 1972. Another collection *Haalas Chhu Rotul (It Is Night Yet)* was published in 1974. One of the stories from the second collection titled 'Kath Chhi Zevi Hanz, Sawal Chhu Thooluk' ('The Matter of Tongue, the Question of Egg') was suspected in official circles of having been based on a true life scandal, and the author was pressurized to withdraw it. Kaul did not relent and published the book at his own expense after 11 years in 1985. It was followed by two more collections of short stories *Yeth Razdaane (In This City)* in 1996 and *Zool Apariyam (Distant Lights)* in 2001. Kaul also published two collections of short stories in Hindi: *Tokri Bhar Dhoop (A Basketful of Sunshine)* and *Arthi (Funeral)*.

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Thank God! I got the taxi right at my doorstep.

I told the driver to rush straight to the college and I looked at my face in the rear view mirror. My ears were still smeared with soap-lather; I wiped it off with my handkerchief. The knot of my necktie had disappeared under the wing of my shirt collar, I straightened it. Looked at my watch. It showed three to ten. The class would start exactly at 10:00 am. It seemed that I'd be late today as well, and again would have to put up with *Sahab's* indignation with a bowed head.

The taxi dropped me outside the college gate at three past ten. I thought *Sahab* would be at the front door, better take the back door stealthily to the class. Ah! My bad luck and noting else! This time *Sahab* was in the back lawn talking to a few professors. Pretending that I hadn't seen them, I climbed the stairs in just a few strides, dashed into the classroom, directly went to the board and wrote the day's topic. All of a sudden, there was some commotion in the class. I turned to look at the boys, they were roaring with laughter. The only girl in the class sat with her head down. Amidst this clamour, a boy stood up and pointed with his finger at my legs. I too looked at my legs, and was thunderstruck. I had put on my shirt, coat and tie, but I had forgotten to put on my pants in hurry.

I sank in the chair and hid my legs behind the desk. I felt as if my life was slipping out through the very legs, and that I'd collapse on the floor with a bang. I held on tightly to the desk. I broke out into sweat. I couldn't understand why this did happen to me. Accepted! I've become forgetful. Sometimes I forget my pen and at other times my handkerchief. At times, I board a *tonga* and forget that I don't carry

¹ Translation of the title is taken from the translation of the same story by Professor Neerja Mattoo.

any money to pay the fare. But this kind of thing has never happened to me. Why did this happen today?

Going to college without your pants on is not a minor crime. That too in a college where boys and girls study together! Even the greatest retribution would not condone for such an offence. But how can I accept that I'm a criminal? That I have committed a crime? I haven't come naked here on purpose. Besides, it wasn't just my obligation to see whether I've put on my pants or not. It was the responsibility of others as well. Let's accept that I didn't remember to put on my pants but others should have pointed it out to me. It's not only my mistake. It is theirs as well.

I sat in the taxi, naked; the taxi driver should have cautioned me. But why should he have cared? He was only concerned about his money. Wasn't it also the duty of the watchman at the college gate? Oh yes! Now I remember. As I entered the college, he was about to say something but then decided not to. May be the poor man didn't want to get himself into trouble. Just four months back he had reported that the roll no. 7 girl from the final year and a professor of chemistry were performing practical in chemistry lab till late in the evening. While the professor got out clean, the poor peon's salary was withheld for two months for reporting wrongly. But still, he should have at least whispered into my ear that I was naked. Where would I have got the nerve to complain against him? But he was perhaps afraid. I don't understand why people are afraid these days of the things they should not.

Perhaps, I too am worrying in vain. Why should I be scared when I haven't done it on purpose? I should have been afraid had it been an intentional act, if I had deliberately come naked to the college. My intentions were clear. So far as forgetfulness is concerned, it could not be helped! To err is human. Even the *Sahab* had forgotten his watch the day before yesterday. Nobody reprimanded him for that! Why should anyone come down on me? His watch was worth three to four hundred rupees while my pants don't even cost thirty rupees.

I didn't start a new lesson that day. I asked the boys to jot down in their notebooks quietly what we had done the day before. They took out their notebooks and started writing. I looked out of the window. Many professors stood in the lawn outside. When I looked carefully, it seemed that they had laid siege to my classroom on *Sahab's* orders.

So, it was clear that *Sahab* had actually seen me in this condition and now he had me arrested in my classroom. He stood there thinking something to himself at a short distance from the professors. After sometime he went into his office and a professor addressed to another professor thus:

'I will let you know all that happened then; I acted prudent and put on my pants at once. She played possum as if she were still unconscious ... When they entered the room, what could they find? They were ashamed of themselves ... what I mean to say is that to cover one's tracks is important ... Not like him!'

The other professor, who was a little elderly, added, 'O yes! God should cover up everyone's flaws and imperfections!'

I thought to jeer at them from here and tell them that I didn't need any cover up. Have I committed any sin? Had I been conscious of it, I would have put on my pants. They could take me anywhere to swear upon this! Actually, due to some problem, I had to keep awake till midnight as a consequence of which I woke up a bit

late in the morning. Still, I was able to finish shaving, bathing and having breakfast by 9:00 am. I put some loose change, a cigarette pack, a matchbox, a handkerchief and a fountain pen into my coat pockets. After making all these preparations, I sat myself down to revise my lecture. This clock runs pretty smooth till 9:00 am but after that something happens to it and it suddenly jumps to 9:30 or 9:45. I have felt this many a times. The same thing happened today. I quickly took off my shirt and pyjamas and changed into a new shirt, wore a tie, put on my coat and left. I didn't want to miss my class. Boys could not be left free. If they aren't engaged, they will shout slogans and light firecrackers. It is also possible that they might start some kind of agitation that will put the whole country on fire. The government will be in trouble. This might harm its interests. Being a government employee, its interests are my interests. That is why I was in such a hurry to reach my college. Damn my being in such hurry!

Sahab came out of his room and joined the professors who had laid siege to me. He said to them, 'I had gone to call the Honourable Minister. He said he himself would arrive on the scene.'

The earth seemed slipping away from under my feet. It wasn't understandable to me how this matter was so grave that the Minister had to be called. Is the Minister informed about everything that happens in the college? Anyway I know how to explain myself to him. I will submit to him that I erred ... Not a mistake but forgetfulness. After 35, everyone is infected with this ailment of forgetfulness. I will remind him that a few years back he had promised that if he was elected to the office, he would end the evils of corruption and lawlessness in the state. But, after he assumed the office, he remained quiet busy due to which he could not fulfil his promises. He too forgot his promises. But his intentions were clear. Had he remembered, he would have wiped out the canker of corruption. Similarly, I too would have put on my trousers, had I remembered. God forbid my intentions were not wicked as his weren't when he made his promises.

Suddenly I heard somebody's sobs. I turned towards the class and what I saw was that the only girl in my class was weeping and dissolving in tears. I stood up and went to her. I too was feeling weepy. I pressed her head to my bosom and began crying myself. We both cried for a long time. Finally, she stood up and wiped my tears with her sari. Then she took the same sari from her shoulders and handed it to me. But I drew back to my chair and said, 'You thought me so shameless a fellow? No! How could I cover my indecency by making you naked? I am not such a rogue. Is your sari the only thing left on earth to cover my shame with? Don't worry. Don't cry. Trust me! I will find some way out.'

Sahab called a few more professors and the siege that was laid to me was further strengthened. He said to them, 'Under rules, we cannot enter the classroom. As soon as the bell goes and the class is over, we will start our action. It is likely that the Honourable Minister also arrives by then.' Looking at his watch, he added, 'There are still 15 minutes for the bell to go.'

I too looked at my watch. It was 10:18 am. The bell goes at 10:40 sharp which meant there were still 22 minutes to go. So *Sahab* told a sheer lie that there are only 15 minutes for the bell to go. He deliberately deprived me of my 7 minutes. I was sure now that they are taking some revenge on me. I decided I won't give away my precious 7 minutes. I won't give up my right. Let them ring the bell after 15 minutes

only. But I will leave the class exactly after 22 minutes. Moreover, I was surprised why any of these professors didn't tell *Sahab* that his watch was not correct; that there were 22, not 15, minutes left. Why didn't anyone among them show some sympathy for me? Even if they had no sympathy for me, why didn't they at least speak the truth? Nobody would take them to task for that! On the contrary, when *Sahab* said there were 15 minutes to go, some of them wound up their watches to synchronize with his.

Let them show no sympathy for me. Let them not dare speak the truth. What harm can they do me? My strength lies in my boys. If they are happy with me, no one can harm a hair on my head. I know I teach them well. I work hard for them. Today, I will try to make myself even more admirable to them. They will realize that only I am their friend and well-wisher. Today I will tell them clearly what happens to their money in the college. How the games fund is misappropriated. I will expose everything. Boys are sleeping tigers. I will wake them up. After that it is not my concern whose blood they drink! Who cared for me that I should worry for anyone. I licked my lips and got up, coughed a little, cleared my throat and addressed them, 'You know a part of the fee that you pay goes to the government but a major portion of it is retained in the college. This money is called College Fund. It must be spent on the students of the college and their welfare. But alas! This doesn't happen. Do you know what happens to this money?'

'Yes, we know,' shouted one boy.

'Good!' I asked him to stand up: 'I thought you were in slumber, you didn't know. But you are more aware than I am. I am very happy with you. Tell me what happens to the College Fund?'

'I get fifty *rupees* daily.' He replied and sat down.

'You get it but not everyone,' I said betraying my anger.

'I get a cup of tea and two eggs every day,' another boy stood up and said.

'I get ten *rupees* and a cinema ticket every week,' the third boy said.

'We get money for cigarettes.' The other boys stood and said together.

I was vanquished. I had thought many a things to myself. I had suspected *Sahab* takes all this money. I didn't know that the money of the students is spent on them. I sighed, and defeated I said, 'So everybody gets something!'

'Yes, all of us,' the boys shouted back unanimously.

'You too get something?' I asked the only girl in the class.

'No,' she shook her head.

I lit up again and started, 'Why not? Don't you pay the fee? Why this injustice to you? You should fight for your rights. I am with you.'

'Can she shout slogans?' A boy stood up and asked me.

'No,' I replied.

'Can she light firecrackers?' Another boy asked.

'No,' I replied.

'Forget it then,' he roared with laughter and sat down.

I forgot it and sank into my chair.

I glanced at my watch. It said 10:23 am. As per my calculation, there were still 17 minutes for the bell to go but for *Sahab* only 10 minutes were left. After 10 minutes, he will get them to ring the bell. Even if I don't leave the class, the boys

cannot be held back. As soon as they hear the bell, they will run out. Here they leave, there the professors enter the room, some through the door and some through the windows, and nab me. Perhaps they will tie me to the chair. Then *Sahab* will enter and action will start against me. In short, my escape is impossible.

I looked again at my watch. There were only 9 minutes for the bell to go. After this, there will be only 8 minutes left. Then only 7... then 6 ... But no! May be I won't have to wait for the bell to go. I might drop dead before that. Before the bell strikes, I may breathe my last on this very chair ...